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ABSTRACT

Little is known about how students become involved in the various dimensions of student change and development as they make the transition from work or high school to college. This paper describes the results of a series of focus-group interviews with 132 diverse, new students entering either a community college; a liberal arts college; an urban, commuter, comprehensive university; or a large research university. The study identifies the human relationships, experiences, and themes characteristic of the processes by which students become (or fail to become) members of the academic and social communities on campus. Findings show that the transition from high school or work to college is an exceedingly complex phenomenon involving such things as personality, personal aspirations, and the nature and mission of the institution being attended. Implications are discussed that involve faculty members, administrators, and institutional researchers. These are as follows: (1) promote awareness of the varying character of the transition process for different kinds of students, (2) early validation as a central element in students' successful transition to college, (3) importance of faculty involvement in new student orientation programs, (4) orientation of parents as well as students, (5) importance of both in- and out-of-class experiences in the transition experience, (6) need for institutional accommodations, and (7) the need to care. Contains 17 references. (GLR)

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THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE: DIVERSE STUDENTS, DIVERSE STORIES

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THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE: DIVERSE STUDENTS, DIVERSE STORIES

Abstract

While much is known about the role of student involvement in various dimensions of student change and development, considerably less is known about how students become involved as they make the transition from work or high school to college. This paper describes the results of a series of focus-group interviews with 132 diverse, new students entering a community college; a liberal arts college; an urban, commuter, comprehensive university, and a large research university. The study identifies the people, experiences, and themes in the processes through which students become (or fail to become) members of the academic and social communities on their campus.

THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE: DIVERSE STUDENTS, DIVERSE STORIES

According to Astin (1985), "Students learn by becoming involved" (p. 133). This notion of student learning has its roots in both the learning theory concept of time-on-task and the Freudian notion of cathexis -- the investment of psychological energy. Astin suggests five basic postulates of "involvement:" 1) involvement requires the investment of psychological and physical energy in "objects" (e.g., tasks, people, activities) of one sort or another, whether specific or highly general; 2) involvement is a continuous concept -- different students will invest varying amounts of energy in different objects; 3) involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features; 4) the amount of learning or development that occurs is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement, and 5) the educational effectiveness of any policy or practice is related to its capacity to encourage student involvement (pp. 135-136).

Pace (1984) speaks of "quality of effort" rather than "involvement," but the two concepts are highly similar. Pace argues that "all learning and development require an investment of time and effort by the student. Time is a frequency dimensions. Effort is a quality dimension . . . . Quality of experience and quality of effort are similar concepts, connected with one another in that the likelihood of having high quality experience depends on investing high quality effort" (p. 7).

Student effort and involvement have been shown to be positively related to gains or changes in a wide array of educational outcomes, including various dimensions of verbal, quantitative, and subject matter competence; higher-order cognitive skill development, and psychosocial, attitudinal, and moral development (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pace, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Surprisingly, however, little research has been done on the personal and organizational mechanisms and processes by means of which students become "involved."

Tinto (1988) suggests parallels between Van Gannep's (1960) notion of rites of passage as a three-stage process (separation, transition, and incorporation) and the processes by which students become

integrated into the academic and social systems of a college or university. As yet, however, there has been no empirical test of the validity or closeness of these parallels. Rodriguez (1974-75, 1982) and Rendon (1992) offer compelling personal accounts of the emotionally-wrenching experiences of being a first-generation, Mexican American college student. With a few exceptions (e.g., Christie & Dinham, 1991; Hays & Oxley, 1986; London, 1989; Perl & Trickett, 1988;), however, the organizational and interpersonal dynamics, mechanisms, and processes through which students make the transition from work or high school to college have gone largely unexplored.

This paper describes the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment's "Transition to College Project," which sought at least preliminary answers to the following questions:

- Through what social, academic, and administrative mechanisms do students new to a campus become involved in the academic and social systems of their institutions?
- What processes are involved in the transition from high school or work to college?
- Who are the important people who facilitate or impede that process?
- What experiences play a major positive or negative role in the success or failure of that transition?
- Is the nature of the transition process different for different kinds of students? For similar students entering different kinds of institutions?

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

Because of the lack of information about which variables may be involved, their relative importance, or the dynamics operating among them in the transition-to-college process, a cross-sectional, focus-group interview research design was adopted. Data were gathered in interviews with groups varying in size from one to eight students.

Institutional Sample Selection

Four institutions were selected that promised to afford considerable variation on both student characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, age, socioeconomic class) and institutional traits (e.g., mission, size, curricular emphasis, type, and the presence/absence of residential facilities): (All

institutional names are fictitious.)

Southwest Community College (SCC): A relatively new community college in a major southwestern metropolitan area. One third of the students are Hispanic and about 18 percent are African Americans; about 3 percent are Native Americans. Enrollment: 3,200.

Bayfield College (BC): A predominantly white, residential, liberal arts college in a Middle Atlantic state. Enrollment: 4,300.

Urban State University (USU): A predominantly black, urban, commuter, comprehensive state university in a major midwestern city. Enrollment: 7,100.

Reallybig University (RBU): A large, eastern, predominantly white, residential, research university. Enrollment: 36,000.

Student Sample Selection

Institutional contact persons were sent information on the characteristics of students sought for participation (see below). Potential participants were advised that the interview would be a group session, that it would last about an hour, and (on three of the four campuses) that they would be compensated for their participation (no compensation was offered at the fourth site because none was requested by the institution).

Because little is known about the nature of that process or about the people and experiences that play important roles in it, the guiding concern in student selection was to ensure that students from diverse personal and academic backgrounds be invited. Participants were not selected randomly nor to be proportionally representative of the new student population (or subgroup thereof) on a given campus or of the national population of students entering higher education in the Fall of 1991. Rather, contact persons were asked to form a specified number of groups consisting of students with characteristics generally typical of the overall entering student population on each campus. Sometimes groups were to be homogeneous with respect to a particular characteristic (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, or place of residence), while other groups were purposefully heterogeneous (e.g., a group of commuting students, mixed by gender).

PROFILE OF STUDENTS INTERVIEWED

Site	Groups	Men	Women	Minority	Total
Southwest Community College	5	8	14	15	22
Bayfield College	6	8	10	2	18
Urban State University	12	20	11	30	31
Reallybig University	13	21	40	9	61
Totals	36	57	75	56	132

Interview Protocol and Data Collection Procedures. The interview protocol was purposefully open-ended and broadly structured to prompt students for information about their backgrounds and decisions to go to college; their expectations for, and the reality of, college; the significant people and events in their transition; selected characteristics of the transition itself, and the general effects students felt college was having on them. Questions were constructed so as to minimize insofar as possible leading students to any particular response. For example, rather than ask if faculty played an important role in their transition, students were asked "Who are the most important people in your life right now?" Whether students' mentioned institutional faculty and staff members or not, their responses would be equally revealing.

Data Analysis. All interview sessions were tape-recorded, and the member of the seven-person research group who had conducted the interview transcribed and/or summarized the tapes. Both individual and group analyses of the interview transcripts (over 200 pages) were conducted, identifying themes that ran through each interview session and through the set of interviews for each campus. Research group discussions of these interviews focused on each campus, seriatim. When the transcripts for each institution had been reviewed and discussed by the entire research group, analysis focused on the identification of themes that were common across campuses and sub-groups of students, as well as on thematic differences distinctive to a campus setting or student subgroup.

Limitations

This study is limited in several respects. First, as noted, subjects were not selected randomly nor to be proportionally representative of any given population (although they were chosen to be more-or-

less typical of students enrolling on each campus). Thus, generalizations to larger populations are not possible. That fact, however, does not affect the power of this study to identify important or valid themes. It simply means that nothing can be said about the frequency with which such themes might occur in a larger population. Second, the institutions at which the interviews were done were selected so at obtain variability on a number of student and institutional characteristics; no claim is made that these institutions are typical of other institutions in their general category. Third, the study is cross-sectional and, thus, no claims can be made about any relations between a successful transition to college and subsequent academic success or persistence (although where students claimed or implied such linkages, they are noted). Fourth, because our respondents were invited by institutional staff members to participate in this study, the students interviewed are more likely than those not interviewed to have been "successful" in their transitions. Finally, it is quite possible that relevant themes other than those discussed here have gone undetected.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Our interviews indicated that the transition from high school or work to college is an exceedingly complex phenomenon. The nature and dynamics of the process vary according to the student's social, family, and educational background; personality; educational and occupational orientations and aspirations; the nature and mission of the institution being attended; the kinds of peers, faculty, and staff members encountered; the purpose and nature of those encounters, and the interactions of all these variables. The process is a highly interrelated, web-like series of family, interpersonal, academic, and organizational pulls and pushes that shape student learning (broadly conceived) and persistence. Despite this sometimes bewildering complexity, however, and despite the limitations on this research summarized above,several potentially important themes, common across settings and kinds of students, emerged. Some themes, of course, vary within setting or across kinds of students.

The Place of College in the Life Passage

College as Continuation: Traditional Students. The educational portion of the American Dream is a story of uninterrupted study and progressively greater academic accomplishment, beginning in

kindergarten and culminating in college or graduate or professional school. For many Americans (primarily, but not exclusively, white), this passage is completed as expected. At Reallybig University and Bayfield College, for example, when asked what had gone into their decision to attend college, virtually all students were surprised by the question, indicating that they had never considered not going to college. For example, two, traditional-aged, white students at Reallybig University explained their "decision" to go to college:

> Going to college . . . was never even, like, a question! Um, both my parents went to college and I guess they figured that all their kids would go to college. I mean, . . . , it was never even too much a question. Um, both my sister and I did pretty well in school and so college was just like the definite thing to follow high school.

Another student chimed in:

> Yeah, I agree. Uh, going to college was never a question. You know, that's never something I thought about, whether I'm gonna go to college or not, that was kind of a given.

These students (and many others like them) and their parents have assumed all along that going to college is what one does after completion of high school. College was simply the next, logical, expected, and desired stage in the passage toward personal and occupational achievement. The passage actually originated in the educational attainment of parents, older siblings, or close relatives who have at least attended, and frequently completed, college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The new student from such a background, entering a college like Bayfield or a university like Reallybig had accepted and was simply extending an established set of family and sociocultural values and tradition. For most of these students, the very fact that they had been admitted to a moderately selective college or university was evidence that academically they "belong" at their institution.

While these students occasionally expressed some concern about their ability to meet the academic competition, making new friends dominated their conversation. For them, the most threatening disjunction was interpersonal, not academic. A new student at Reallybig University described his experience:

> I hated it. [Another student: 'So did I. I cried . . .'] Like, for the first couple of . . . I, I hated it, 'cause I was like, here I am in a situation where I know absolutely nobody. I mean, it's like, it's like you're just dropped in, it's like 'Here you go!" And you know no one. You know, you had all these close friends and good friends, and you're always having a good time. And I

> had a great time in high school, and I, you know, a really great time. And I got here and I knew nobody. And it was just like, it was terrifying. . . . when I first got here, I wanted to transfer. I was like, 'That's it! Send me to a branch campus! I'll commute from home." . . . then I started thinking of it, like, 'OK. It has to get better.' And like, it's great. I love it now.

College as Disjunction: First-Generation Students. On the surface, the educational transition for first-generation students may seem much like that of traditional students entering "traditional schools" like Bayfield or Reallybig. For all students, the transition involves adaptation to a new set of academic and social systems. Among non-traditional, primarily first-generation, college students, however, the adaptation to college was far more difficult. Indeed, for many, going to college constituted a major disjunction in their life course. For these students, college-going was not part of their family's tradition or expectations. On the contrary. Those who were the first in their immediate family to attend college were breaking, not continuing, family tradition. For these students, college attendance often involved multiple transitions -- academic, social, and cultural. A young Native American student explained her motivation for attending Southwest Community College:

> Right before (my mother) died, she took me out to the reservation, and when we were outside the reservation, and she pointed it out to me and said, 'Do you want to be like this? Sitting around and doing nothing? Or do you want to go on?' So it was probably the reason why I went to college. Because they really have no life out there. She goes, she goes, 'The majority,' she told me that the majority of the Indians that, that don't, don't, that don't go to college or don't finish school just move back to the reservation and just sit there.

A young, African American student at Urban State described being beaten up in high school by classmates who disapproved of his interest in ideas and his attention to his school work. Later in the interview, when asked what was special about USU, he replied without hesitation: "Well, like I said before. It's very open-minded here. . . . you can read in the hall or on the steps, and nobody will throw a brick at you." A classmates (in another interview) described his reasons for going to college:

> I have a lot of reasons, but I guess, basically, because of where I live, a lot of kids are killed often, and, you know, I decided to further my education just to get away from it. I, I don't like the fact that people are, you know, constantly shooting at you. It, it's, uh, it's bothersome. You don't want to be bothered with these gang bangers gettin' you, rising up, so I said, 'Either I make a difference or I get out of here." And I said 'I'll do both, ...'

Because of their family and educational backgrounds, going to college often constituted a significant and intimidating cultural transition for the first-generation students in our study. Attending

and completing college carried the potential for radical changes in these students and the lives they led. Indeed, for many (such as the two young people quoted above) the decision to go to college was a conscious decision to escape the occupational dead-ends and hopelessness their life courses otherwise promised.

Several cautions are warranted here. Further research is needed about the subtle and complex ways first-generation students negotiate separation. Cultural disjunction does not necessarily imply that all students need or want to separate totally from their culture to attain success (Rendon, 1992), and further research should probe how non-traditional students maintain or reject their personal cultural integrity and succeed or fail in college as a result of this process. Not all students are like Richard Rodriguez (1982), who attributes his academic success to shedding his Mexican American identity. In fact, many college students maintain strong ethnic affiliation values and achieve a moderate to excellent level of academic success (Gurin & Epps, 1975; Rendon, 1992).

For many of these non-traditional students, the academic transition to college was the most challenging. When asked what they expected to find in college and what they actually found, most spoke of the anticipated academic rigors of college in comparison with high school. Most came expecting to have to study hard. Most found what they had expected, but others (a relatively small minority) commented that college was not all that much more difficult than high school had been. The majority, however, appeared to be deferring involvement in the non-academic activities and life of the campus until they felt they had their academic lives under control.

In contrast, traditional students spoke more frequently of worrying about making new friends, or (at Reallybig) of becoming lost in the crowd. But if the academic transition was of greater concern, making friends was commonly cited as being the key to "feeling connected" or "a part" of their institution. Several students spoke of looking forward to the time when, once they were on their feet academically, they could devote more time to out-of-class activities and people. For a number of Southwest Community College students, the academic and interpersonal activities often overlapped, easing the transition in both spheres. These students spoke positively of meeting other students in their

classes or on the student union's patio, and engaging in both social conversation and group discussion of what was going on in their classes. Several identified these sorts of sessions as among the most effective learning experiences they had (along with in-class discussions of course material).

High School Friends: Assets and Liabilities

The interviews also made clear that high school friends were instrumental in how successfully these new students made the transition to college. When a student knew high school friends who were also new students (or friends or siblings already enrolled) at the same institution, these pre-college friends functioned during the early weeks or months of college as a bridge from one academic and interpersonal environment to the next. Such earlier acquaintances provided (and may themselves have received) important support during the transition. Friends performed this "bridge function," however, for a limited period of time. As a student's friendship network began to extend beyond the set of high school acquaintances, the student developed closer relationships with students not known before college, and high school friends slowly faded in importance.

While high school friends who went to the same college appeared to serve a similar "bridging" function for new students at schools like Southwest Community College and Urban State University, high school friends who did not go on to college may have served to complicate and hinder the transition. Such high school friends may have functioned as interpersonal anchors, tending to hold the student in the network of friends and pattern of activities and interests of the pre-college years. A commuting student at Bayfield (quoted earlier) alluded to the interpersonal pull of high school friends who did not go on to college. A recent high school graduate attending Urban State described an encounter with a high school friend:

> Well, after we graduated, I seen him last week, matter of fact, and, um, he was just hanging on the mailbox, just, just, telling me, 'What's up man? What you doin'?" And, you know, he seen the bookbag on my shoulder. 'Aw, man! You goin' to school? Aw, man, that ain't nothin', man.' You know, I just looked at him and hugged my shoulder bag, and left. You know, cause, um, see, he, he's not going to succeed in life. He's gonna be the one that's on the corner with the wine bottle, or he gonna end up dead. See, me, I'm gonna end up in school, you know, probably with a high-paying job, doin' what I like. [Another students comments: "Or at least a job."]

A young woman at Southwest Community College experienced similar pressures:

> My friend, . . . plays basketball. But she, like, goes out partying and things like that. But she's after me. She (says): 'You're getting boring. You just stay home and study.' I (say) 'No, I'm going (to college). . . . It's something I'm paying for. And . . . I wanna learn something. . . . I'm gonna be needing (it) . . . in the future.'

Thus, it would appear that one's high school friends were not unalloyed assets to students trying to make connections with a new college or university. Depending upon the individuals involved and the circumstances, they could be assets or liabilities.

The Family: Asset and Liability

There can be little doubt about the important role new students' families played in providing encouragement to attend college and to persist and succeed while there. With very few exceptions, when asked "Who are the most important people in your life right now?", students unhesitatingly named one or more members of their immediate family. The sense of debt to parents for their support was greater among students at SCC and USU, but it was also apparent at BC and RBU. Among students at the latter two institutions, the more muted response seemed to reflect more their taking parental support for granted rather than an indication that they enjoyed any less parental support than their commuting peers. Residential students appeared to be developing greater personal independence and autonomy from family and, thereby, to be redefining the nature of the relationship they had with parents to be more one based on the equality of adults rather than on any superordinate-subordinate, parent-child relationship.

For some students, however, particularly those from Black, Hispanic, or Indian families, some parents may have tried to maintain a relationship they recognized may be changing. This dimension of the transition process for these students, of course, was intimately related to the cultural disjunctions described above. Some parents may well have recognized that their college-going children -- as proud of them as they were -- might, metaphorically, never return home. For example, a Southwest Community College student described this loving tension. Asked who the most important people in his life were, he replied:

> My grandmother. Even though she is a big inspiration to me, uh, she has this way of clinging. She hates to let go of things. And I can understand. I think that's why she takes in a lot of us, as we're going along. She hates to let go. And my cousin and I have told her that we're going off, goin' to college. She goes, 'I can't believe you're gonna leave.' You know, 'I need you here with me to do this or do that.' 'Listen, Grandma, life goes on. This may sound cold, but when

> you're gone, we're still here. And, uh, we need to so some things to prepare for our future.' And she's startin' to understand that.

Sensing such fears, some of the students of these parents appeared to find their anxiety levels rising in ways and to degrees probably unimagined by most middle-class white students, faculty members, and administrators.

The Importance of "Validating" Experiences

A number of the non-traditional students who had entered the Southwest Community College and Urban State were experiencing serious self-doubts and indicated an array of needs that we came to describe generically as the need for "validation." By that term we refer to a process similar to that described by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986). Validation is empowering, confirming, and supportive. It is a series of in- and out-of-class experiences with family, peers, faculty members, and staff through which students come to feel accepted in their new community, receive confirming signals that they can be successful in college and are worthy of a place there, have their previous work and life experiences recognized as legitimate forms of knowledge and learning, have their contributions in class recognized as valuable, and so on. Validation can be something that is done for and in conjunction with the student, but for some students it may also be a self-affirming process as the student discovers new competencies or reaches levels of achievement previously thought unattainable.

In many cases, these students' high school experiences had signaled to them in various ways that they were not seen as serious or competent learners and, thus, were expected to fail. For example, one returning woman reported: "I expected to fail. Two weeks and I was out. I didn't think I could study. I didn't think I could learn." Another student felt she would be "just a number." Yet another student reported she had chosen to attend a community college "because I saw my brother go to a four-year college and he barely made it. He said it's hard. His advice was to go to a community college." Such experiences failed to "confirm" or "validate" the student as one capable of learning and deserving of a place in a college classroom.

Some students described invalidating experiences with their college instructors. An African American woman who held a General Education Degree (GED) and attended Southwest Community

College described such an experience:

> I went to secretarial school and I started working on Wall Street for an investment firm. I went in as a file clerk. . . . And within about two or three years, I was making my $35,000-$40,000 a year. . . . But when I came to [the campus where she was enrolled] I was made to realize that I was a young black woman with hardly any education. . . . to come [here] and have someone speak to me as if I had the education of a five year-old . . . that was a real bummer.

Other students talked about invalidating classroom experiences. Said one community college student:

> My math teacher . . . he has a number [for me] . . . I was a number, you know, instead of calling us by name, he would call us by our social security number. There aren't many people in class for him to go through all that and it's quicker for him to say my name than my number.

An RBU student described an encounter in an elevator with one of her large-class instructors. When she commented that she was in the instructor's class, he replied: "So what?"

Some students, however, had enjoyed highly validating, even transforming, college experiences. They spoke of teachers who communicated to them that they were capable of learning, who brought school work to the home of a student who was ill, and who structured learning activities that allowed students to experience themselves as successful learners. Some students spoke of instructors who, through the time, energy, and interest they invested in their students, had instilled a sense of obligation to succeed. These students felt they could not let these instructors down. Out-of-class validation was equally important and came from the support of family and peers, who (as noted earlier) were often the most important people in the students' lives.

In contrast, students attending the two predominantly white, residential institutions had already experienced academic encouragement and success in elementary and secondary school and were further validated academically simply by being accepted by their institutions. For these students, the importance of the validation process was more social (being accepted by their peers) than academic.

The Transition and the "Real Learning"

When asked "Where does the <u>real</u> learning occur around here?", a number of students, as might be expected, spoke of the classroom and various formal instructional activities, or of the preparations made for class. When encouraged to define "learning" broadly, however, it was clear that for a

substantial number the "real learning" meant learning about oneself, discovering abilities or personal sources of strength, developing pride in one's ability to survive, and becoming more independent and self-reliant. Such learning included developing "survival" skills (e.g., money and time management skills, personal goal-setting); developing the self-discipline to "just do it" when a task or obligation was recognized; taking responsibility for one's physical, financial, and academic well-being, and developing a clearer understanding of oneself and one's goals through interactions with faculty and peers who held goals, attitudes, or values different from the student's. For some residential students, the transition represented an opportunity to explore a "new self," to try-on a different "persona," to redesign one's self in ways that were impossible for students living at home. For some non-traditional students, as described above, the transition required a redefinition of self and values.

The most consistent element of this theme, however, was the pride students took in their achievement. Students who had made the transition were very proud of what they had accomplished. New vistas had opened up, new abilities were discovered, new goals were considered -- and all these things gave these students deep personal satisfaction.

The Transition as a Cooperative Activity

For residential students, the transition was an ordeal to be shared and experienced together. There was strength in numbers and some solace in the thought that "we're all in this together." It appeared to be seen as the process (if not rite) of passage that one must make on the road to "a good job." What they were going through was to be expected and part of the process of beginning "the college experience." For most (but by no means all), even if a bit intimidating, it was a time of exploration, wonder, discovery, and fun. The cooperative character of the process meant helping one another meet and make new friends, establish one's social network and become established in those of others.

In the voices of many non-traditional students, while many of these same elements were apparent, their volume was more muted. There was also the sense, emanating from the dual nature of the transition as both an educational and cultural passage, that these were serious, potentially dangerous

waters. These students supported one another by consciously avoiding criticism of one another's work or performance. The cooperative nature of the passage was evident in students' discussing classwork together outside class, learning from the comments others made in class, making sure too much fun didn't interfere with getting school work done, reminding each other in subtle ways that academics were the first priority. In some instances, the cooperative nature of the transition was brought directly into the classroom, as instructors required students to learn about, and then introduce, a classmate; constructed group assignments that required students to get to know each other and to work together on a common project, or invested so much of their own energy and time in helping students that the students came to feel a positive obligation to work hard to succeed.

IMPLICATIONS

A considerable amount of evidence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) indicates that if students become involved in one or another aspect of their new college communities -- that is, if the transition from high school or work to college can be negotiated successfully, the likelihood of student change, educational growth, and persistence are significantly increased. So what can we do to ease the transition? The themes identified in this study have a number of implications for faculty members, administrators, and institutional researchers:

1. **Promote awareness of the varying character of the transition process for different kinds of students.**

Faculty and staff must carefully consider the varying characteristics of an institution's students and the corresponding variations in students' transition experiences. Such reflection may be particularly important for faculty and administrators whose backgrounds and college experiences resemble those of "traditional" students at Bayfield College and Reallybig University who probably entered a four-year college at age 18, directly from high school; were from middle-class, white, parents who also went to college, and who lived on-campus). Compared to their traditional peers, students from disadvantaged socioeconomic and educational backgrounds confront and undergo a dramatically different transition, one that is at once academic, social, and cultural. Most campuses' current instructional practices, academic regulations and policies, and workload expectations recognize few differences among students.

Meaningful alterations in teaching styles and techniques, as well as the development of new learning experiences for increasingly diverse students, however, cannot be effectively designed in the dark.

Institutional researchers have a particular role to play here. Much information on the varying characteristics or entering students (and how those characteristics may be changing over time) is already available but only infrequently shared with faculty members, department heads, deans, and other academic administrators. Perhaps the best antidote to stereotypic thinking about students is information on how inaccurate those stereotypes are. It seems likely that faculty members would benefit from small group interviews (similar to those done in this study) focusing on the transition process for diverse groups of new students. While such research might be organized and coordinated by the institutional research office, the findings are likely to have greater impact if developed (and thereby endorsed) by respected members of the faculty.

2. Early validation appears to be a central element in students' successful transition to college.

Whether academically or socially (and there are decided variations across institutional types), new students need to be reassured that they can succeed: that they can do college level work, that their ideas and opinions have value, that they are worthy of the attention and respect of faculty, staff, and peers alike. Academic validation appeared to be particularly important for first-generation students. Faculty members must be made aware of the importance of such early reaffirmation, particularly for students for whom college attendance is such an emotionally risky venture. The "wounds" some students bring to college must be understood and accorded the attention, support, and gentleness they require. The validation of students need not be formal (e.g., graded work). It might take the form of words of encouragement, of constructive and reassuring critiques of student answers or work. The message may take many forms, but its content must be consistent and clear: students can learn, they are valuable as people, their experiences and ideas have legitimacy in and out of the classroom, and the instructor and institution are there to help the student learn.

An important policy issue resides beneath the importance of validating students' worth and performance. There is reason to believe that such validation is critical to student persistence and degree

attainment. If access to occupational success and "the good life" is not be restricted according to socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or gender, then all students must have an equal opportunity to benefit from their educational experience (Astin, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Moreover, in many of our interviews with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, there were clear indications of altruistic motives for wanting to go to college -- not simply to rescue oneself from a grim future, but also to give something back to family and community. Denying such students the opportunities not only to attend but to succeed closes the door on potential social and economic multiplier effects that college completion may produce.

3. Involve faculty members in new student orientation programs.

There is evidence in this study and elsewhere (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 1986) that student orientation programs serve an important early socialization function. Through orientation, new students receive their first introduction to the attitudinal and behavioral norms of a new academic and social setting and to what will be expected of them in that community. Faculty members, as noted earlier, have been shown to play important roles (both in and outside the classroom) in what and how much students learn on a broad front. It is important that new students make contact with faculty members as early as possible in their college careers. Indeed, such contact may in itself be a form of validation in that it reflects faculty members' interests in students and a willingness to help students find a home in their new academic community. If orientation, however, is little more than an early course registration and a general introduction to Old Siwash and the services it offers when there are various kinds of problems, then an important opportunity to help new students make connections with the academic and intellectual life of the institution will have been lost.

4. Orient parents as well as students.

The evidence strongly indicates that parents/spouses play a key role in the support of new students adjusting to a new environment. Such support is needed most by first-generation students, whose parents/spouses may be least able to provide it, not having been through the transition experience themselves. Parents/spouses of all students, but particularly those of first-generation students, must be

helped to understand the nature of the academic and time demands that will be placed on the students, what will be happening to students (and to the parents/spouses as well!), and how to deal with the stresses parents/spouses and students will be experiencing. Many institutions currently involve parents/spouses in their orientation programs, but the need may be particularly great for parents/spouses of first-generation students.

5. The transition to college involves both in- and out-of-class experiences.

What happens to students outside the classroom shapes in important ways how students respond inside the classroom, and vice versa. While the implications of this are hardly new, academic and student affairs divisions on a campus must come to see and respond to the interlocking character of students' in- and out-of-class experiences in the transition process. Academic affairs administrators and faculty must recognize that substantial and important learning goes on outside of class, and student affairs administrators must begin to consider how the activities and programs of their division relate to the academic/intellectual mission of the institution.

6. Institutional accommodations are required.

In the past, we have tended to develop new student support programs implicitly assuming that the challenge is to help students adapt to the institution. In some cases, and to a certain extent, this may have been appropriate. For non-traditional and diverse students, however, the logic needs to be reversed: Institutions must seek ways in which they can change so as to accommodate the transitional and learning needs of first-generation and other non-traditional students. Some students will flourish in their new environment without institutional intervention. Others, however, will require assistance that is initiated by institutional representatives -- faculty and staff. Faculty cannot assume that their sole responsibility is to teach and advise, and that if students don't take advantage of what they have to offer it is the students' problem. The burden of responsibility for taking advantage of transition support mechanisms cannot rest with the student alone.

7. Somebody's gotta care.

In some ways, perhaps no theme was more persistent throughout the interviews -- regardless of

race or ethnicity, gender, age, or institution attended -- than new students' need for self-esteem in its many variant forms: self-confidence, a sense of being in control, pride in oneself and what one does, respecting oneself and being respected by others, valuing oneself and being valued by others. The important role of self-perceptions is apparent in such themes as the academic, social, and cultural character of the transition process for non-traditional students; in the need for early validation from faculty and peers (whether the validation is of an academic or interpersonal nature); in the need for connectedness and a sense of belonging at the institution; in the move to personal independence and autonomy, and in proving oneself capable of success, however the individual defines that concept.

For these new students, the sense that they were competent and mattered came from many sources: parents and other relatives, peers, faculty members, institutional staff. Most of the students we interviewed and who appeared to have successfully made the transition from work or high school to college, identified someone who had clearly indicated to them that they cared. In many ways, a successful transition for any given student is a cooperative activity, involving the individual and the will to succeed and a variety of other people willing to make success for that student possible.

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If "involvement" is a central mechanism by which students maximize the range and extent of their learning opportunities, the route to "involvement" remains circuitous and as-yet poorly mapped one. This research project has identified a number of the dimensions of the transition individuals make from high school or work to college and suggested places where institutions and policy makers might intervene to facilitate the successful passage for most new students. Its purpose has been to shed some light on the nature of the process for different kinds of students attending different kinds of institutions and to identify some of the elements and dynamics of that process for additional examination.

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